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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTANI ACADEMICS DISCUSS RELATIONS WITH CHINA,
WELCOME OBAMA'S ELECTION, EXPRESS DIVERGENT VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: In December, PolOff met with several academics from one of Kazakhstan's most prestigious universities, Al-Farabi National University in Almaty. PolOff's interlocutors stressed the importance of Kazakhstan's balancing closer ties with China and Central Asian countries with deeper ties with Russia and Europe. The academics welcomed Barack Obama's victory in the U.S. presidential elections, but believed an Obama administration would not significantly change the U.S.-Kazakhstani relationship. They expressed dramatically different points of view concerning Kazakhstan's progress on democratization, but agreed that the opposition is ineffective. They thanked the Embassy for its support of Al-Farabi's programs. END SUMMARY.

CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY IS LIKE A PLUM

¶3. (SBU) In December, PolOff met with several academics from one of Kazakhstan's most prestigious universities, Al-Farabi National University in Almaty. Professor Seifulla Sapanov, an expert on Kazakhstan-China relations, told PolOff that China is striving quietly, primarily through commerce, to gain influence in Central Asia. This quiet strategy helps China avoid conflict with Russia. According to Sapanov, Chinese companies have acquired stakes in a large percentage of Kazakhstani oil companies. He said that because it is cheaper for Kazakhstan to purchase many goods from China than produce them domestically, this has caused a huge Kazakhstan-China trade imbalance, which President Nazarbayev has highlighted in a number of his speeches.

¶4. (SBU) China and Kazakhstan, Sapanov argued, have also pursued their mutual interests in closely monitoring the activities of potential separatist movements, especially among the Uighurs. According to Sapanov, China has built a far more cooperative political relationship with Kazakhstan than with any other Central Asian country. Sapanov noted in particular that China cut off financial assistance to Uzbekistan after the Andijon uprising, and relations between Kyrgyzstan and China have cooled in the last few years over Uighur issues.

¶5. (SBU) Despite the more positive Kazakhstani-Chinese relationship, however, Sapanov argued that analysts often

underestimate tensions underlying the areas of cooperation. Sapanov cited as an example the difficulties in finalizing a Kazakhstan-China agreement on trans-boundary rivers. Sapanov also claimed that Chinese foreign policy is "clever, but not transparent," and therefore Kazakhstani political leaders do not really trust agreements made with China. Professor Fatima Kukeyeva, Chair of Al-Farabi's International Relations and Foreign Policy Department agreed, and stated that "Chinese policy is like a plum, soft at first, and harder later."

"EURASIAN" IDENTITY

16. (SBU) Aliya Kafayeva, an Al-Farabi expert who has authored works on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as on Kazakhstan's relations with China and India, dismissed the importance of Central Asia to Kazakhstan. "Senate Chairman Tokayev is interested in a policy of a Greater Central Asia," commented Kafayeva, "but Kazakhstan has a long history of living with Russia and is going to be OSCE Chairman-in-Office. We should be getting closer to Europe, and pursuing a Greater Central Asia policy will push us away from Russia and Europe." Kukeyeva agreed, noting that Kazakhstan's neighbors do not recognize it as Asian or Central Asian; therefore Kazakhstan, which has geographical and cultural ties to both Asia and Europe, must develop its own uniquely "Eurasian" identity. "We must not neglect the European Union," Kukeyeva maintained.

OPTIMISM ABOUT OBAMA, BUT NO MAJOR CHANGES EXPECTED

17. (SBU) PolOff's Al-Farabi interlocutors were by and large surprised, but pleased, that Barack Obama won the U.S. presidential elections. They said they were very interested in how U.S. policies would change in the Obama administration, and how other countries'

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policies would change in response. Mariam Buzurtanova, an expert on U.S. relations with the United Nations, told PolOff that even though she expects a Democratic administration to be more willing to work with the UN and make multilateral commitments, the United States has historically demonstrated a reluctance to delegate its right to use force. Buzurtanova noted that Obama will have to focus on a number of domestic issues, and thus she did not expect a dramatic shift in U.S. foreign policy, particularly concerning Kazakhstan, at least within the first few years. Albina Salimbayeva, a post-graduate scholar researching U.S. non-proliferation policies, also doubted that Obama's victory would significantly alter U.S.-Kazakhstani relations, commenting that neither Obama nor John McCain had mentioned Central Asia extensively during their campaigns. Kukeyeva said that although she had hoped Obama would win, the Bush administration and specifically U.S.-Kazakhstan cooperation on the war on terror "had been good for Kazakhstan." She pointed out that for many countries, including Kazakhstan, security concerns which might arise from a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq could be "problematic," but also remarked that America's image had improved "dramatically" with Obama's election.

DEMOCRACY IS LIKE PREGNANCY

18. (SBU) PolOff's interlocutors expressed strikingly different views on Kazakhstan's success in democratizing. Kukeyeva, the most senior by position and age, was actually the most critical, stating that "some claim that Kazakhstan is open to democratic processes, but that is not the case." As she put it, "democratization is like pregnancy, you cannot be partly pregnant or partly democratic, either you are, or you are not." In sharp contrast, the youngest and most junior scholar, Salimbayeva, said, "Kazakhstan is democratic enough. Different countries have different democracies, and Western countries must respect this." Kafayeva offered a middle perspective, noting that Kazakhstan has been independent for only 16 years, and is "on the way." She suggested Kazakhstan could provide proof of its democratic credentials in its conduct as OSCE Chair. Buzurtanova told PolOff that one of the most significant problems for democratization is the weakness of the opposition. All the academics agreed that the general populace does not trust or respect the opposition because they are perceived to be representatives of narrow interest groups, incapable of uniting people behind any ideology. Kukeyeva called them a "pocket opposition." Most people

in Kazakhstan "vote for security," Kukeyeva argued, explaining that political instability in Iraq had not been a good advertisement for democratization.

PRO-AMERICAN ACADEMIC APPRECIATES OUR ASSISTANCE

¶9. (SBU) Kukeyeva is a prominent and avowedly pro-American academic in her late fifties, who participated in exchange programs with the University of Alabama-Birmingham in 1994 and 1998, conducted research at Valdosta State University in Georgia in 2001, and was a Fulbright Senior Scholar. She has published a monograph entitled "International Organizations in the Modern World" in English, and has taught courses on U.S. history, foreign policy, and the history of international relations. In addition to serving as the Chair of the International Relations and Foreign Policy Department at Al-Farabi, Kukeyeva leads the university's Resource Center for American and Democratic Studies (RCADS). Kukeyeva told PolOff that the resource center seeks to identify anti-American groups and provide them with exposure to pro-American ideas and sources of information.

¶10. (SBU) Kukeyeva thanked the Embassy and the Embassy's Branch Office in Almaty for their support, emphasizing that thanks to U.S. support, RCADS has conducted lectures and conferences, and American professors have taught at Al-Farabi and have led special summer programs. Kukeyeva reiterated that although Al-Farabi's International Relations and Foreign Policy Department has a short history and only 400 students, it is particularly important because many of its graduates go on to work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a number of the remainder going on to academic institutions, international organizations, and foreign businesses. Kukeyeva said that the students are very talented, since the

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Department only selects students who scored well on the national examination, and students must know at least one Eastern and one Western language. Beginning in the second year, students select a specialization in one of several countries, such as China, India, or the United States. Kukeyeva noted with concern that several years ago, most students selected U.S. studies, but now China and India account for 30 percent.

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